

No Roots by quinnvicious

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Canon-Typical Violence, Internalized Homophobia, M/M, Slow Burn

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Neil Hargrove, Steve Harrington, Susan Hargrove, Will Byers

Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

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Summary:

Billy is fucking with him, Steve is sure of that much. If he was fucking with him any harder he'd be asking for his hand in marriage. Steve takes one last glance back to the middle school gym where he knows Nancy is probably having the time of her life without him, and he suddenly really hates the idea of spending the rest of the night in the parking lot, sitting alone and smoking in secret over his heartbreak. Even getting his ass kicked by Billy Hargrove again would hurt less.

He flicks away the smoldering remains of his joint and hops off his trunk with a curse and a stomp to make sure it was out. Billy is flashing him a knowing smile by the time Steve slides uneasily into the passenger seat of his Camaro.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

thank u to my wonderful beta cyd and the harringtongrove fandom who keep this fire burning within me

Summary for the Chapter:

When Billy wakes up on the floor of the Byers' house, eyes bleary and head pounding, he's completely alone.

When Billy wakes up on the floor of the Byers' house, eyes bleary and head pounding, he's completely alone. He sits up, and the score marks in the wood between his legs swim in his vision as he tries not to be sick all over the paper beneath him. He drags himself to his feet, stumbling through the now-freezing house and sniffing hard around the blood caking his nose until his head is a little clearer and he no longer feels like he's falling down a fifty-foot hole in the dark.

Billy sweeps through the rooms, dragging his limbs heavily behind him, and after a hoarse shout asking if anybody was still there, he gets no answer other than the crickets chirping from the broken window. The brats had just *left* him there. He feels the hot slice of anger up his spine and it sticks into the base of his skull like a knife. His jaw clenches until the wound where his teeth had torn through the inside of his cheek from the punches Harrington threw at him is bleeding again and it stains his snarl a bright red color. His anger mounts and he lashes out, uncontrolled like a cracked whip to punch the nearest available surface.

It just so happens to be the refrigerator. His already bruised knuckles collide with a resounding crack and he reels them back instinctively as the pain shoots up his arm. The door of it bounces open with the force, and he jumps backwards to avoid the sudden slimy blanket that spills out to fall into his lap after he's fallen so far his ass is slamming into the floorboards. Except it's far heavier than he would have expected, and the impact of its tumble has it unwrapping,

revealing grotesque, grey limbs that reach for him and a bloom of thousands of needle-like teeth. Billy is shocked enough that instinct has him scooting backwards until his back hits the leg of the kitchen table and he's staring with wide eyes like it would suddenly jump up and bite him.

After a few frozen moments of the lizard part of Billy's brain determining that the horrible corpse on the floor is indeed just that, the smell of rot hits him and he drags a cold hand over his mouth. He breathes through his fingers and ignores the pain warming his face. When he finally tears his watery eyes away, he takes in what he'd only glossed over during his fit when he first barged in the house-- the curling stretch of sketched paper tentacles tapped over every available surface, the phone, ripped away and tossed haphazardly into the corner, and the curtains fluttering over the shards of broken glass from the window. He wonders just who the hell was crazy enough to *live* in a place like this.

His boot slips on ripping paper as he scrambles to his feet, and he braces against the table to keep himself upright through another wave of dizziness and nausea. He toes at the corpse as he walks by it, grimacing as it gets slime on his boot. And then he's rushing towards the door with the intent of getting as far, far away from the crazy-ass house as he possible can.

He jerks it open and the chill of the porch has him shivering without his jacket. He leaves it that way just to spite the people who live there. Fuck it—he wasn't about to spend another second on this brat. If Neil and Susan wanted to find her so bad, they could do it themselves. He'd be happy to tell them *just* what the little shit had been up to all day-- his father's wrath be damned.

Billy pinches the bridge of his nose and squeezes his eyes shut in an attempt to clear his head, and steps off the porch into the dirt driveway. When he opens them again, he realizes his car is missing. His arms fall limply to his sides as he stares disbelievingly at the empty space. He slides a hand into the pocket with his missing keys and silently vows to kill every single one of those brats before morning.

The whole situation is absurd enough that he laughs, harsh and bitter

with his head thrown back as he chases the blood in his mouth with his tongue. The thought of Steve Harrington cuts through the lingering fog of his mind. Billy had knocked his lights out pretty good, so it couldn't have been *his* idea. That just left Max, then. He runs his fingers through the tangle of curls at his forehead as the familiar simmering calm of boiled-over rage envelopes him. The edges of his vision are red, and instead of waiting for them to get back from wherever the hell they'd gone with his car, he walks without thinking in the direction of the street. He'd take his chances--someplace far away from the inexplicable body wrapped in a quilt on the floor.

They better hope he doesn't find them.

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Steve is still dragging gasps of frigid air into his scratchy lungs by the time the kids have all collected themselves and are ready to move again. His back is against the car door, his ass in the dirt in the middle of the rotting pumpkin patch not five feet from the now-closed pit to the upside-down, and he groans as Dustin shoves at him to get him to get *moving*, already. They're all eager to return and find out what happened to Will, Eleven, and the others, and Steve can hardly blame them, but he feels like he's just been to hell and back and needs a few more minutes than those of them who didn't just have their ass beat six ways to Sunday.

He's finally up on his feet with the help of Mike and Max pulling at each of his arms and he feels like a brat with every pained sound of protest. Steve leans against the car to keep himself upright and sighs in defeat. He holds out a hand to Max, who looks at him with confusion drawing her brows downwards. He gestures impatiently with his fingers and she's quickly digging in her pockets as she realizes what he's asking for. She drops Billy's keys in his hand with a sheepish look and then they're all climbing into their seats, Steve a little less easy than the rest.

A few hours later, after all the tearful reunions and a trip to the hospital, Steve can see the energy levels flagging, and the night catches up to the lot of them. It was getting extremely late and Steve could only imagine what everybody's parents were going to say. After

Steve had been checked over by a nurse for his face and given some butterfly stitches for the worst of it, he finds himself hanging back as the group crowds around Will's hospital bed. He isn't really sure where he belongs at this point. He tries to ignore how close Nancy is standing next to Jonathan—it's been a challenging time for all of them, but the Byers family most of all, and he shoves aside his heartbreak and tells himself he's honestly glad they had someone as wonderful as Nancy to support them.

Even Chief Hopper had stayed to let Eleven be with her friends for just a little while longer, and he reassures Steve he'd help get everybody home safely. At the mention of home, Max's eyes go wide as she realizes she's been missing all day and her parents were going to flip. Had *already* flipped. She's about to go find a payphone to call them while the others are distracted with recounting the night's events when both she and Steve share a matching, horrified look as they both remember about *Billy*.

They still had his car, and he was probably still laying on the floor of Joyce's house, and Steve really doesn't want to cause her and her family any more trouble. They tear out of the hospital parking lot with a quick excuse and a goodbye, and after some prodding, Max tells him what she'd done to Billy after Steve had been knocked out. Steve scolds her for being so reckless, but he trails off in quiet thanks, both angry at her for putting herself in potential danger and extremely thankful she'd saved his ass. He speeds them down the dark street to the Byers' house and bangs his forehead on the steering wheel as he tries to figure out how the hell they were going to make it through the rest of the night alive.

From hordes of bloodthirsty demo-dogs to a Billy Hargrove with a grudge. Tonight was *really* not his night.

The car skids to a hard stop in the dirt driveway and Steve regrets not making his entrance quieter. He's waiting to find Billy sitting on the couch with a kitchen knife in his hand or something, and Max must be worrying the same thing from her pale expression in the seat next to him. He turns the ignition off and steps out, ready to ride into the belly of the beast. He keeps the bat clenched in his fist, just in case.

They find the door wide open, and Billy nowhere to be found.

He's been walking for who knows how long, jaw working over his anger like a bit and his arms crossed over his chest to fight off the creeping chill of winter. There are no street lights down the road to the Byers' house, and he hates the stupid hick town of Hawkins all the more because of it. He glares at every sound coming from the woods, scowl practically daring something to jump out of the dark and try to take him on when he was pissed off enough to *kill* something.

When he hears the all too familiar roar of his own Camaro's engine, he doesn't turn around. He keeps walking forward even as he feels it slow down beside him, until it's matching his pace, and he strains every muscle in effort not to turn towards it and start yelling. He knows if he does, and he sees *Harrington* or one of those stupid kids in his driver seat, he won't be able to stop himself this time. That's not even counting what he'd do if they'd fucked up his baby in any way.

"Billy!" Max's strained voice calls out and he stops his angry stride to glare sideways at her. She's leaning over the back of the driver's seat, looking at him with concern, like she's actually *worried* about him or something, and he feels his jaw throb and his nails dig into his palms as the range-burner of his fury flicks back to high. It burns that much hotter as he stares down Steve Harrington, who's sitting in *his* driver seat just as he knew he would be, looking resolutely ahead with his knuckles white on the dark leather of the wheel. Steve is quiet, purposefully restraining himself, and the shadow of purple and green gracing the teen's face has a feeling of animalistic triumph rushing through Billy that's almost enough to make him forget about his anger. *Almost*.

He feels like he had in the Byers' house, his attention sharp and laser-focused enough that he misses the weary way they hold themselves and the mud caking their clothes. He doesn't care where their little group had been or what they'd been doing. All he cares about now is getting Max home and being done with this godforsaken night.

Billy lowers his arms to his sides and waits, expectant for an explanation but wanting none. The dent in the front of his car catches

his attention. Steve doesn't miss the way his whole body stiffens and his eyes are spelling murder when he bores them back into Steve. He looks like there's nothing in the world he'd rather be doing than dragging Steve out through the open window and throwing him under the wheels of his car. Steve winces and sighs through his bruised face.

"Look, I'm really sorry about the car, okay? I'll pay for any damages." Steve wasn't about to confess it had been the kid's idea to steal Billy's car in the first place, and that he'd been unconscious at the time. As their unofficial protector, he couldn't put them in that kind of danger. He wonders if Billy already knows, as he watches the other boy's dark look focus on Max for a brief moment. He's overcome with the urge to step between them despite still being strapped to the driver's seat.

"You're damn right you will." When Billy finally speaks it's quiet and calmer than Steve was expecting, but his fingers twitch around the steering wheel all the same. Billy studies them both for a few moments before he's looking down the street and shaking the hand that's been clenched too tight at his side until the pin-and-needle feeling goes away. He doesn't ask any of the furious questions bouncing around in his head. His anger and intense curiosity is overshadowed only by the thought of his father pacing the living room carpet, contemptuously awaiting his arrival with his little sister in tow. And what he'd do if Billy *didn't*.

"Get out." He juts a thumb to motion Steve to get the hell out of his seat. Steve blinks back at him and within a heartbeat he knows he can't leave Max alone with Billy and feel good about himself after. He's not positive he'd actually do anything to hurt her, but he'd still feel bad about it anyway. He puts the car in park and unbuckles the seat-belt, and with a determination he usually only feels while fighting off inter-dimensional monsters, he climbs over the middle console and into the passenger seat.

Billy watches him in disbelief. He doesn't miss the worried glance Harrington keeps throwing between him and Max, and he's offended and pissed off that Steve could even pretend to know what his relationship with her was like. As if his father wouldn't literally kill him if he even *thought* about hurting her.

He shakes his head, thumbing the bridge of his nose and letting out a breath along with the last of his energy. He'd been ordered to bring Max home, so that's exactly what he'd do. Maybe he could drop Harrington off in the middle of a field or by the dump where he belonged. He pops the driver door open and slides into the seat, too-warmed by Steve's body, and works the soreness out of his jaw. The tension is still thick enough to slice with a knife, both of them eyeing him like he was a wild animal about to lash out and it almost has him feeling better. He's still annoyed but hey, he *wants* them to be afraid.

Billy takes a secret delight in the way Steve flinches when he reaches for his leather jacket to fish out his pack of cigarettes, which had been stolen along with his car. He'd find some way to get them both back for that particular slight, but right now, all he wants is a smoke and to go home and sleep off the nasty cotton-ball feeling the tranquilizer has left in his head. He lights one up with a flick of his lighter and takes a minute to let the comforting blanket of smoke fill his lungs and ebb the tides of his fury.

Out of the corner of his eye, he admires his handiwork on Steve's face; the red and purple swelling around the hard determination in his eyes that has Billy a little taken aback. Steve looks just like he did moments after he'd clocked Billy in the kitchen—like a lion looking after his pride, ready to tear out the throat of his enemies. But that was before Billy's insecurity over being challenged had beat it back out of him. He contemplates the dark street ahead of them and puts the car back into gear.

"Either of you try this shit again, and I'll kill you," he says, low and dangerous between the blood still flaking from his lips. He doesn't need a reply to know they both get the picture. He's letting them off *lightly*. Steve still looks defiant in the shadow of his bruises and Billy sweeps the taste of adrenaline from the back of his teeth with his tongue. He quietly buries the secret part of him that rises up at the sight of him and resolutely drives them all away from the cold dark of the Hawkins back-woods.

2. Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

Steve wonders just what was becoming of him. His only friends are a bunch of middle schoolers and his ex-girlfriend. Though if he had to be honest, he wouldn't trade them for anything.

Notes for the Chapter:

thanks to my beta cyd <3
also i know nothing about d&d in the 80's

A few days after the nightmare they all went through, Nancy officially breaks up with Steve. He's known it was coming ever since the hour or so they spent digging through the old trash from the Byers' shed, trying to find more space heaters to save Will with. Maybe even before that. Maybe he'd hoped they could still make it work, despite the obvious reasons why it *wasn't* working. Maybe he's just an idiot.

Nancy has feelings for Jonathan-- and while she does admit Steve has always been a good boyfriend, she tells him he just isn't a good boyfriend for *her*. It still hurts his feelings, because he'd *tried*, he really had, but he's not selfish enough to keep her from where she wants to be, and he lets her go. He loves her enough that as long as she's happy, nothing else matters. And he's happy for them, he tells himself, despite the hollow ache it leaves inside his chest.

He does appreciate the time she gave him to recover while his face healed up from Billy Hargrove's onslaught. He certainly didn't want her postponing the break-up because she pitied him or something. He's already had too many people throwing poor-baby looks and stupid theories at him after he refused to say anything about it. There's still the green of old bruises blemishing his face, and the sight still makes him wince every time he passes a reflective enough surface. He knows he's looked pretty miserable since even *before* the ass-kicking.

Thankfully, Billy had been avoiding him ever since. Steve's sure it won't last long, if the dark burn in the other boy's stare from across the court during practice was any indication, but he's glad for the break. He's still not sure how to brave those waters. Billy could seem like he wanted one thing, and then in the next minute, something else entirely. Step over the wrong barbed wire fence and he'd be on you like an attack dog, all snapping jaws and sharp teeth.

He distracts himself from the empty feeling in his chest by hanging out with Dustin and the kids whenever he gets the chance. Being around their little group is cathartic for him, and it helps with the uneasy notion that something bad could happen to them at any moment while he's not there to keep them safe.

Will is recovered enough to come hang out with them all for D&D night again, and Steve is surprised when he gets a call from Nancy during the night of their game. She asks him if he wants to come over and help her babysit, since her parents were going out and she had to keep an eye on her baby sister, too. Steve hadn't been doing anything besides watching bad television and getting chips all over his couch, so he agrees. He's glad she still likes him enough to want to hang out with him. He hops in his car and makes it to the Wheeler's house before seven.

A half an hour later and he's getting roped into playing along with them. He's never played the game in his life, and he feels like an idiot when they start explaining all the rules to him and he has to have several things repeated before it even begins to stick. Max doesn't know how to play either, but she's a much faster learner. She hangs back with him to help him through it and he silently thanks her a hundred times over again. Nancy is peeking down into the basement after putting her sister to bed and Steve, not wanting to be the only older kid there, coerces her into playing too after a puppy-eyed look and some back-up from Max and Dustin.

After Lucas' enthusiastic recommendation, Max rolls a wilder. Steve picks a fighter, because it sounds easier, and Mike lets Nancy be a druid after some huffing and puffing about the older kids intruding on their little party. Will talks about how he's been asking Jonathan if he'd come play as their rogue, and Steve's silently thankful the fact he hadn't succeeded. It's not that he hates Jonathan in any way, he

just knows how awkward it would get with both of them there with Nancy between them.

Within ten minutes of actually playing, Steve's character gets mauled by some sort of bear after a poor roll, and Dustin is laughing at his absolutely terrible luck. He smacks his head on the table and groans when he hits a sore spot, lifting his head to rub at it and wince. Nancy frowns around a mouthful of popcorn.

"Hey, what happened to you, anyway?" She addresses him and the rest of the table goes quiet, wide-eyed looks being thrown across the play-board. Nancy sees them, and looks apprehensively around, herself. Her voice goes quiet and uncertain. "Nobody ever told me anything about it."

Steve's reluctant to admit he got his ass kicked, but thankfully Dustin is there to do it for him.

"Yeah, he got his ass kicked trying to protect us from Max's brother." Dustin says on a laugh. Nancy's eyebrows go up in their characteristic way when she can't believe what she's hearing, her eyes wide and doe-like. Max tosses a glare at him. He stumbles to amend, "Sorry, *step*-brother."

"And then Max saved *him*. It was pretty awesome." Lucas chimes in. He looks at Max with admiration and she rolls her eyes at him. Nancy looks back and forth from Max and Steve like she's wondering how that was possible. Dustin is still laughing over something that sounds suspiciously like 'saved by a girl', and Steve doesn't refrain from chiding him for it and telling him that girls can kick ass, too.

Nancy is smiling along with them and Steve can't even be mad at being grilled about it. In hindsight, after all the bruises had healed and the kids were safe and sound, it *was* kinda funny. Nancy tries to hide her amusement behind more popcorn as the kids keep going on about how epic and scary that night had been, and how well Steve did to protect them and he feels his heart warm. He's glad there isn't any bad blood between them, because he wouldn't want to miss that look for the world. It had all worked out all right, hadn't it? Steve couldn't really find anything to be mad about, either.

They play for a few hours and the group cheers when Nancy gets a high roll that ends up saving all their asses and she's hesitantly cheering too like she's not exactly sure what she did, but she's glad it was a good thing. Steve can't tell what she did either, but they're all having fun and laughing and it warms the cold over in him long enough that he forgets every terrible thing that's happened to them.

Steve wonders just what was becoming of him. His only friends are a bunch of middle schoolers and his ex-girlfriend. Though if he had to be honest, he wouldn't trade them for anything.

And despite Mike's initial reservations, Max had definitely earned her place in their party. Mike still misses Eleven; it's obvious in the sad tilt to his eyes whenever anybody mentions her, but Hopper had promised she'd be able to be with them all soon. Will still had the occasional haunted look, too, but he's obviously doing better than he'd had in months. The kids are all very resilient, and Steve is glad for it.

Eventually, the hour grows late and they all start to gather up and set off for home. Nancy thanks him again for helping out and he tells her he's happy to do it anytime. Her smile has a sad tightness to it as she's closing the front door after him, and then he's walking to the curb where he parked and swinging his keys around a finger. Dustin's mother had come to pick him up, so Steve doesn't have any other duties for the night, and he heads home alone.

Half-way there, the smile and the high of having a good time fades, and the cold constricting around his lungs, like fingers sliding underneath his ribs, returns. He breathes out a sigh and lets his head bounce back on the headrest, arms stretched and fingers tight around the steering wheel. The anxiety and nervous tension of worry take his body back over and he tries to keep his head blank and focus on his headlights cutting through the dark.

He can't shake it. He doesn't want to go home to his big empty house. He hates the feeling that someone had *died* there, (but no, not just someone-- *Barbara*, he reminds himself), and if he goes back it could happen again, except this time to him. Steve pulls into his driveway and sits in his car long enough to convince himself that the nightmare is over, the gate is closed, and nothing is going to happen

—to *anybody*. Nothing was coming to drag him into the cold dark and rip him apart.

But it's not good enough to keep the nightmares from haunting him. He wakes up more than once, shivering with the images of Dustin or one of the other kids ripped open and covered in blood at his feet, their dead eyes glassy. His fault, because he'd gotten there too late and it crushes him until he can't breathe. He wonders if this is how Nancy felt after Barbara. He feels like a terrible boyfriend all over again.

He peels himself out of bed to wash the sheets of sweat away with a hot shower and stumbles downstairs to turn all the lights on, knowing for a fact he won't be getting back to sleep that night. He holds his nail bat held tightly in his shaking fists, ready to swing at any little sound he mistakenly hears as the bone-rattling whistle of a demo-dog, or the low groan of the Demogorgon clawing though his ceiling.

For the last year, Steve had been spending his time pretending the events of last October had never happened, and that his life was still normal. That the things in his life still mattered, and they weren't burned away by the fact that monsters exist, and that there was an entire other dimension full of them, right on his doorstep. That shit like having a girlfriend to take to prom, or getting on the varsity basketball team, or even something as important as finishing his college application in time meant *anything* to him anymore.

Now he *can't* avoid it. Now all he's left with is the nightmares, and the gut-clenching need to make his life mean something, *anything*, again.

3. Chapter 3

Summary for the Chapter:

Billy doesn't have a name for how he feels about Steve Harrington. It's something intense and layered, with some layers he'd outright deny the names of, even to himself. Especially to himself. What he does know, is that he wants to hurt Steve. He thinks he wants Steve to hurt him, too. He needs him to fight back, to compete on his level—if not slightly better--to make the victory that much sweeter. He needs the challenge of a mountain to climb-- to be able to reach its top and call himself the king. Billy wants the taste of that more than anything in the world.

Notes for the Chapter:

beta: cyd < 3

this one's a Billy chapter, and next we dive head first into that sweet steve/billy mess

Billy has learned enough from past experiences to know that the tidal wave of fury his father has in store for him when he gets back around three in the morning is unavoidable. Neil's on him as soon as he's climbed out of his car, walking up to the threshold with Max in tow. He's stormed out the front door, and after one look at the mud on Max's clothes and the bruises and blood on Billy's face, he's standing over Billy with furious purpose. He firmly demands that Max and her mother get inside the house. Billy braces himself for the inevitable, his eyes already hot and stinging. They both turn to look at Max after she refuses to move.

Susan becomes a little braver after that, and she's stepping down from the porch despite her husband's hard-clenched jaw, and then she's kneeling in front of Max and brushing her dirty red curls out of her face. Neil is still fronting on Billy, barely restrained rage vibrating his fists, and Billy hates the feeling that Max just saved his ass. Worst of all, she has no idea just *how* much. It would have been far worse if the two girls hadn't been standing right there. He guesses his father

isn't low enough to subject his pre-teen step daughter to the worst of his violence, after all. Not yet, anyway.

Susan's fretting and asking Max what happened and after a far-off look Billy knows is a precursor to a lie, she's telling them she got lost in the woods while playing with her friends. Susan is just glad to have her safe and sound after the last few hours of worrying herself sick. It's condoling enough that even Neil is walking over to check up on her.

"Did *you* know she was out playing with her friends?" Neil blinks back at Billy, like this whole thing is still all *his* fault. Billy can't breathe. The bitter truth is right at the tip of his tongue, but the look on his father's face and Max's pleading eyes have him biting it hard enough that he's not sure if the taste of blood in his mouth is old or new. They'd *both* be in huge trouble if his father knew what had really been going on. Of course, Billy would get the *real* brunt of it.

All of Billy's anger drained from him when he took it all out on Harrington earlier that night. Every bit of pent up rage flying from his fists, then sucked away with a needle and the sedative and he just wants to get this insane night over with so he can sleep if all off.

"Yeah. I asked around like, six different places before I found her," is all he admits. He wants to bury himself in a hole when his voice cracks on the 'yeah'-- too long since he last spoke. He wants to scream at his father and damn their stupid brat to hell. He wants, but he'll never be stupid enough to try. Not with Neil standing right there.

"It's my fault. I left without telling him where I was going." Max looks guilty and Billy grinds his teeth. Neil's eyes soften, and he temporarily sets aside the hell storm headed Billy's way in favor of making sure Max isn't too badly hurt. Billy is the only one not buying her sympathy play. Max looks back at him as they usher her inside, and he returns it with a glare to make sure she knows he hasn't let any of the bullshit she'd pulled on him slide in any way. This whole mess was *her* fault, not his. *Again*.

He's left outside, scoffing at his parents fawning over their perfect little princess and he doesn't even have enough energy to kick a rock

or something in rage. He presses the heels of his hands hard over his eyes before raking his fingers through his tangled hair. After a long sigh, he drags himself up the steps and sneaks to the safety of his room.

If Billy had to be honest with himself, he'd admit he had no actual idea what happened tonight. It feels like a fever dream he can't wake up from. He sits on the edge of his bed and lights a cigarette to keep his mouth busy and chase away the shake still keeping his hands unsteady. Billy takes a deep drag and replays the night over in his head. He starts at the beginning, after he left, and ignores the sharp pinch of anxiety in his gut when he glosses over the initial confrontation with his father.

There was a lot of driving through the dark. Stopping at several houses, some more entertaining than the rest, before he gets to the Byers' house. Finding Harrington on the porch and the jump-start of adrenaline he got at the very sight of him. Seeing his little sister and her brat friends in the window. His knuckles throb in time to his memory of punching Steve's face over and over again. There's still blood under his nails and the taste of it under the smoke on his tongue.

Billy doesn't have a name for how he feels about Steve Harrington. It's something intense and layered, with some layers he'd outright deny the names of, even to himself. *Especially* to himself. What he does know, is that he wants to *hurt* Steve. He thinks he wants Steve to hurt him, too. He needs him to fight back, to compete on his level—if not slightly better-- to make the victory that much sweeter. He needs the challenge of a mountain to climb-- to be able to reach its top and call himself the *king*. Billy wants the taste of that more than anything in the world.

Steve was disappointing him in that regard, but the image of the fire in Steve's eyes right after that first punch still clings to the back of Billy's eyes. The look felt like a promise, and Billy has every intention of making Steve *keep* it.

He falls back to the mattress with a bounce, legs still hanging over its edge. His mouth hurts, but it's a good ache, and he alternates between tonguing at the split his teeth left on the inside of his cheek

and biting his bruised lips. He sighs a drag of smoke through his nose and stacks an arm behind his head, thumbing the end of the cigarette with his free hand.

Various versions of their fight keep flowing through his head like a movie reel. He can't ignore the tight coil of heat wrapping down his spine or the buzzing tingle in his busted hands. It washes all the way down to the back of his thighs, the last dredges of adrenaline making him bounce his leg and his skin warm up from where the cold of his rolled down car window had chased it away.

He rewinds to that look on Steve's face again, clear as day behind his eyelids, and bites down on his tongue. He snaps out of his reverie when the sounds of the other members of the house moving through the hallway reach his ears. Billy freezes at the low rumble of his father's voice through the walls and feels sick when he realizes his hand had slipped under his belt line and he'd been groping himself through his boxers to the thought of beating Steve Harrington to a pulp.

He jerks his hand away as if he was burned and swallows hard around the sudden lump in his throat, staring up at his popcorn-ceiling like it had offended him. Hot shame rises to his cheeks and he hates himself for even allowing the thought of wanting Steve Harrington to cross his mind.

With a quiet, frustrated growl, he stubs out his cigarette in the ashtray on his bedside table and pulls one of the pillows down to plant it over his face and muffle his scream into it. The pain of the night's bruises makes him wince, and then he's taking deep breathes of the fabric softener on his pillowcase and willing himself to calm down and try to get some damned *sleep*.

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They're all having a rare sit-down around the table for breakfast when Neil announces that Billy will be keeping a closer eye on Max. Both Max and Billy are shocked around their mouthfuls of toast, before it settles into stiffened limbs and heavy annoyance. Billy doesn't look at his father after that. Or Max, for that matter, other than a few glances to glare at her and silently remind her it's all her

fault they're in this situation. She glares back, no longer threatened by him.

Billy still hates her, but he's grown a kernel of respect for her for fighting him back. He has no doubt she really would've driven that bat full of nails home if she'd had too. Remembering it brings back all the questions he has about that night, and he gets a funny look from her when he snaps his teeth a little too hard around the metal prongs of his fork in frustration.

Max no longer being afraid of him closes off a big outlet for his anger—one he'll have to take out somewhere else, or let its poison build up that much thicker under his skin.

Billy finishes his breakfast and pushes down the questions of why she'd had a bat full of nails, or what the hell the syringe had originally been for, or why Harrington had a bunch of kids locked away in a stranger's house-- before *stealing his car*-- and he scoots loudly out of his seat. He's a littler gentler after the hard look Neil throws him for the disturbance, and he asks if he can be excused. After a quick lie about going to finish up getting ready to take both of them to school, he's escaping back to his room to simmer in his thoughts.

Worst of all, he wants to know what the *hell* that thing in the fridge was.

--

For a week, the questions nag at his brain, until he realizes he's been biting his fingernails again-- something he hasn't done since he was a shitty little kid—and he smokes more cigarettes to keep his mouth away from them. He's always assumed this town was just another boring shit-hole farmer town, just like the hundreds they'd passed on the drive here from California, but maybe he was wrong. Or maybe everyone here is just a bunch of crazy-ass hick lunatics and they're trying to drag his little sister into their weird cult crap. As far as he's concerned, they can *have* her.

He finds himself for more irritated than usual, snapping at any and every minor irritation like a misbehaving dog trapped behind a fence.

When the news story about Hawkins Labs starts broadcasting on the television while he's working out, Billy is really tempted to dismiss everything he'd seen on its bullshit excuses. It isn't until the next day, when he see the pinched look on Harrington and Max's faces whenever somebody mentions it within earshot, when he *really* gets curious. They know something he doesn't, and the fact's enough to aggravate him to the point he's socking Tommy across his freckled face after school after he makes one too many stupid comments that annoy him.

Billy is absolutely livid by the time the night of the Snowball dance arrives, and he's pacing the living room and waiting for his step-mother to release Max from her fussy claws. He'd played the good soldier, and volunteered to drive her there. He's biting at his nails again because Susan had asked for a limit to the cigarettes in the house, and when he catches Max's annoyed gaze from the doorway to the bathroom her eyes dare him to say something. He doesn't.

He's worked his thumbnail down to the tender skin underneath by the time Susan's done taming Max's mess of ginger hair and has moved to the living room to take a couple pictures. In her motherly haze she motions for Billy to get in a shot next to her exasperated daughter, and frowns when he refuses to move from his place against the mantle. He was already getting nauseous at the scene of happy domesticity, and he's really not eager to be roped into it too. Watching Max suffer is the only thing he's getting out of this.

They finish up and then Max is brushing past him impatiently, Susan trailing close behind to wave them off from the doorway and reminding them to drive safely. Billy rolls his eyes where his step-mother can't see it and the two of them set off for the ball.

It's a quiet ride. Billy wants to grill his step-sister for information, but most of him just wants to go out and get drunk and worry about it tomorrow. He almost wants Max to have fun tonight, just so she'll stay late and he'll have more time to fuck around while waiting to pick her up again. They make it to the middle school and Billy pulls up to the front to drop her off. He tries to keep the bite out of his voice when he informs her when he'd be coming back to drive her home, and that she'd better be here. She slams the door in his face, but doesn't flick him off as he pulls away. It's the closest either of

them have come to having a civil interaction since their parents moved them to Hawkins.

He pulls into an empty parking space to think over a much-needed smoke, and to figure out just what he wants to go do for the next few hours. He has a few phone numbers from some of the local high school girls folded behind his sun visor, and he debates calling one up for entertainment. He freezes just before he clicks the lighter poised at the end of the cigarette hugged tightly between his pursed lips.

Out the fog of his window, Billy can see a familiar car parked a ways off. Sitting on the trunk is none other than Steve Harrington. A smirk comes unbidden to his lips and he's tossing his lighter in the passenger seat and putting his car in reverse. He pulls out of the parking space with a wolfish grin, having decided *just* how he'll be passing his time tonight.

4. Chapter 4

Summary for the Chapter:

“What do you want, Hargrove.” It’s less of a question and more of a translation of his own annoyance.

Billy’s eyes bore into him like drills, super-heated and intense. His tongue darts out to wet his bottom lip in the briefest of movements, and Steve’s eyes chase it as he tells himself he’s just high enough that he can’t help it. Billy half-shrugs like the answer is obvious.

“A *light*.” There’s a cigarette between Billy’s two fingers and he holds it up to Steve impatiently.

Notes for the Chapter:

beta: $\text{cyd} < 3$
the boys finally interact

After Steve drops Dustin off with a few words of encouragement, followed by the rip of the band-aid off his still-fresh heartbreak, Steve parks out by the high school to wait. He doesn’t really have anything else planned for the night. Before everything had gone to hell again, Nancy was the only person he really hung out with, and now that she’s gone, he honestly doesn’t have much to do in the way of socializing. All his other friends turned out to be major assholes, and he isn’t desperate enough for human contact to suffer them tonight. There’s probably a party he could go to, but he’s made a habit of throwing away any invitations he’s gotten over the last month.

He sits on the top of his trunk and gazes up at the stars, clear-cut through the clear winter air. It’s a nice enough night that he’s pulled out one of the few joints he keeps stashed in a wrinkled old cigarette pack in his glove compartment and lit it with a cheap zippos to keep his mouth warm. He’s about halfway through it when a familiar dark-blue Camaro pulls into the space next to him in the sea of empty ones. Steve shuts his eyes and hangs his head in an attempt to make

the other boy go away through sheer force of will.

Billy is smirking as he sidles up to stand in front of Steve where the other boy can't avoid him. He nods his head at the joint pressed between Steve's fingers.

"I guess the rumors are true. You aren't such a boy scout after all." Billy works his jaw like he's chewing over his excitement at getting Steve alone, and his shit-eating grin is already grating on Steve's nerves. He frowns as he briefly wonders just what kind of rumors he'd been hearing. *Everybody* smoked in high school, and as the so-called King of Hawkins High, Steve has a certain reputation to maintain. Okay so maybe he isn't the king *anymore*—he still enjoys it from time to time.

Billy's hands are shoved warmly into the pockets of his heavy leather jacket, which remains unzipped, his shirt buttons dipping low enough that Steve can almost see his belly button. He's close enough that Steve can watch as the cold chases goosebumps over his exposed skin and he wonders who in their right mind would go out in the middle of winter dressed like that. But Steve doesn't feel *cold* as he looks at him. The silver drop earring dangles over his sun-lightened curls and Steve hates him more in this moment than he ever has—as his throat goes dry and the curl of heat paws unignorable in the seat of his gut.

"Smoking weed outside a middle school." Billy continues to goad him when he doesn't dignify him with a response. He clucks his tongue like a disappointed parent. "Got nothing better to do, Harrington?"

Steve finally sends him a withering look and subtly moves the hand with the joint behind himself as he leans back on it. He blows a mouthful of smoke in Billy's direction just to prove he's not bothered by him. Whether more to himself or to Billy, he's not *entirely* sure.

"What do you want, Hargrove." It's less of a question and more of a translation of his own annoyance.

Billy's eyes bore into him like drills, super-heated and intense. His tongue darts out to wet his bottom lip in the briefest of movements, and Steve's eyes chase it as he tells himself he's just high enough that he can't help it. Billy half-shrugs like the answer is obvious.

“A light.” There’s a cigarette between Billy’s two fingers and he holds it up to Steve impatiently.

Steve hesitates. He knows for a fact that if he doesn’t tell Billy to go get bent right here and now, the other boy won’t be leaving him alone ever again. He can see the winded spring-cord of tension straining at Billy’s limbs like a jack-in-the-box ready to pop at any moment. Steve’s not sure he’s ready for a round two between them just yet. Or maybe it’s round ten. Every interaction they’ve had feels like a fight to Steve—or at least a precursor to one.

He mentally kicks himself in the ass as he pulls the lighter from his jeans pocket. He’s about to toss it to him, but Billy is faster, and before Steve can react through his haze, Billy’s standing close enough that Steve’s knees are brushing either side of his chest under the leather of his lapels. Billy’s hands are wrapped around the one holding the lighter in a tight fist. Steve shakes off his shock enough to flick the flint wheel with a thumb, marveling at the endless heat Billy seems to possess.

The fire catches and Billy’s eyelashes hide the orange glare of light on his eyes as he puffs his cigarette and cups a hand around the flame to keep the cold breeze from snuffing it. The color is so intense in the dark that Steve momentarily imagines Billy being *made* of fire. His body is certainly scorching enough, and Steve feels the heat of it seep through his hand and the knees of his jeans until the rest of him is shivering with the contrast.

The dangerous edge of deep-shadow doesn’t fade from Billy’s face even after the light goes out, and he pulls the cigarette from his lips with a drag, the smoke he sighs out getting swept to the side with the wind playing in his curls. He brings it back to his lips and studies Steve from over his hand. Steve’s not sure what will happen if he moves.

“Your face is looking better.” Billy whispers just low enough for Steve to hear, and the cold brush of a fingertip across his jaw line has Steve jerking back in surprise and shoving Billy away hard. Billy laughs even as he stumbles away, and when he recovers he’s smirking and staring at Steve like a hungry wolf would a prime rib. The sound of it grinds Steve’s nerve down to the fiber and it brings back that

treacherous itch under his skin that's been there since the night they'd fought.

"Yeah. *Thanks.*" Steve retorts, dry and sarcastic. He leans in with his elbows on his knees, defensive. He considers Billy's appearance and clings to any chance that the asshole was dressed up for a reason and would suddenly remember he had somewhere else to be and leave him alone. Steve gestures limply in Billy's direction, hiding his annoyance behind a draw of his joint. "Don't *you* have anything better to be doing?"

"Plenty." Billy jabs, standing still and solid in his stand-off across from Steve, his body language the picture of offense. He blows out another puff of smoke and inspects Steve through the haze of blue as their clouds mix before dissipating. "Compared to *you*, anyway."

Billy looks around in a dramatic fashion before settling on the gym lit up down the way. "So what is it this time, hm? Are you creeping on the cute little kids again?"

Billy's tongue splits his cruel smile open like a wet knife. "Or just your whore of an ex-girlfriend?"

Steve's fists clench on their own accord and all his hackles raise to the point he's clenching his jaw and taking every effort not to jump off his trunk and tear Billy apart. He doesn't give a fuck about Billy implying shit about him—but bringing Nancy into the mix was uncalled for. Steve wants to punch that amused, mocking look right off of Billy's face. He wants to feel the crack of his knuckles across those pretty cheekbones until they're a ruined pulp. He wants to tear at his lips with his teeth.

It's exactly what Billy wants him to do, and Billy must see what he's thinking on his face because his mean grin lifts in a genuine, giddy glee-- the slice of bright teeth in the dark of his expression. The hot rage boiling in Steve's blood drains from him at the sight of it as he tries to convince the guilty feeling invading his chest that he is *nothing* like Billy Hargrove.

The smiles drops back into something bordering counterfeit as Billy slides in close again. This time Steve doesn't lean away or push at

him, just meets Billy's gaze head on with an anger to his glare that he doesn't even bothering trying to hide.

"Let's go for a ride." Billy tilts his head in the direction of his car, his tone low enough it has Steve double-taking at the sudden warmth behind it. The tension crackling in the narrow space between them whips like red hot lighting and Steve can't tear his eyes from Billy's as he tries to figure out what the game here is. The memory of talking to Dustin about how some girls like it when you're aggressive pops unbidden into his head. He swallows away the sudden thickness in his throat and huffs a barely-there laugh, turning his head away.

"No way in hell I'm going anywhere with you." Steve tries to play the whole thing off, like Billy is just pranking him. But Billy isn't smiling anymore, and Steve feels the cold flush of goosebumps creep up the back of his neck. A beat of Billy silently studying him, and then the other boy is sucking down one last pull of his cigarette and flicking away the remaining butt with a vexed exhale.

"Wasn't a *request*, Harrington." Billy leans in close enough that Steve can smell the clean scent of shampoo and weathered leather under the smoke-- see the thick lashes around his glower. "Get in the car."

Steve's suddenly aware of the serious turn, like dark clouds just off the shoreline, spilling lightning into the water where you hope the wind is kind enough that it doesn't blow it your way. He watches Billy with caution as the other starts walking towards his car. He tries to keep his eyes above the hem-line of the other's leather jacket as he goes, but with jeans that tight, it's *hard*.

"I've got a couple questions for you. You're going to answer them." Billy states matter-of-factly over the top of his Camaro. He yanks open the door as the barest shadow of a smirk returns to his face.

"And if you *don't*," he shrugs, sarcastically nonchalant. His lips curl over his shark smile and Steve could swear he just saw the other boy wink, but maybe it was just the weed—"I'll just have to kick your ass again."

Billy is fucking with him, Steve is sure of that much. If he was fucking with him any harder he'd be asking for his hand in marriage.

Steve takes one last glance back to the middle school gym where he knows Nancy is probably having the time of her life without him, and he suddenly really hates the idea of spending the rest of the night in the parking lot, sitting alone and smoking in secret over his heartbreak. Even getting his ass kicked by Billy Hargrove again would hurt less.

He flicks away the smoldering remains of his joint and hops off his trunk with a curse and a stomp to make sure it was out. Billy is flashing him a knowing smile by the time Steve slides uneasily into the passenger seat of his Camaro.

Billy drives them away from the school, and Steve is *absolutely* positive he's going to regret this later.

5. Chapter 5

Summary for the Chapter:

Billy clenches his jaw and thumbs the remaining end of his smoke, ashes flicking across the back of his hand. He's starting to think this whole thing is some kind of fucked-up revenge play, set up just for him. Maybe the thing in the Byers' fridge was just somebody's mutant, inbred puppy, and the drawings taped all over the walls the work of some schizoid kid. The whole thing feels like a big joke at his expense. He bets Max has something to do with it all—his little step-sister's a regular little *mastermind*.

Notes for the Chapter:

this has taken me forever but hey a few more chapters and we get to the bangin *finger guns* beta'd by me so mistakes were made

Billy drives them across town with no real destination in mind. There are a few places he knows of that are quiet enough that no one could come to Steve's rescue should Billy make good on his threat to beat the information out of him. Anyone who doesn't know Billy well enough might think he's stalling. The tension in the cab thickens until Steve is giving him the side-eye while trying to be subtle and failing miserably.

"What the hell is this about, anyway?" Steve frets, and Billy hides his shark grin behind the fresh cigarette he pulls from the half-empty pack in his pocket. "Or are you seriously planning on taking me out to the middle of the woods and burying me there." He deadpans, only half-joking, but Billy's blank stare has the smile running from Steve's face in a hurry.

After a moment, Billy laughs—sudden and sharp enough that Steve almost flinches. "Christ, take a chill pill, Harrington."

Billy lights up his cig before cracking his window enough that the

smoke had somewhere to escape to. Steve isn't going to get so lucky. He tosses the lighter onto the dashboard and takes a minute to let the warm blanket of smoke envelope his lungs once again. He's been smoking a lot more than usual, he knows, but he's had a hell of a lot on his mind.

Steve relaxes marginally, but the dragging silence has him throwing up his hands in exasperation. Billy snickers to himself. *Wear 'em out and drag 'em down.* He decides to finally take some mercy on him.

"You know, something's been bugging me about that night." Billy feels Steve tense up next to him. He looks over to bore his glare into the creeping deer-in-headlights expression Steve can't keep off his face. Billy eyes it, his extreme suspicion turning the words foul in his mouth. "What *exactly* were you doing with my little sister's losers' club in the middle of some crazy hick-shack in the woods?"

Steve huffs a nervous laugh, trying and failing to gloss over the mounting hostility. "Man, are you juicing or something? I already told you, I was babysitting."

Steve had been half-expecting Billy to bring it up, but he hadn't prepared a clever enough excuse to explain all the strange shit Billy had been an accidental witness to. Come to think of it, he's not sure what *other* reason Billy would have to drag him out for a drive. Steve kicks himself again for getting in the car in the first place. And for the small kernel of hope that they would be doing something other than fighting, for once.

"In a stranger's house?" Billy scoffs, repeating his interrogation from the night in question. He exhales a cloud of smoke and glowers at Steve expectantly.

"The kids were all hanging out there and Ms. Byers had to take her son to the hospital or something, so she called me." Steve is way too dizzy to lie decently, and his bouncing leg and the turn of his eyes to anywhere but Billy is enough ammunition for the other boy to call him out for lying.

"Or *something*?" Billy prods. Whatever the truth is, Steve isn't too keen on sharing it, and it's pissing him off. Billy stares him down, no

longer caring about watching the road. He bites the filter of his cigarette and speaks through his clenched teeth, the sarcasm floating on the air like the fine haze of swirling blue. "Seems like a pretty important detail if you ask me."

"I didn't." Steve retorts. Billy's fingers twitch as he just barely resists the urge to slam Steve's head into the dashboard.

"So, where'd your little party go with my ride?" Billy's knuckles are white on the steering wheel, his voice clipped and anger surging. Steve looks back and forth from Billy's dark stare to the even darker road ahead of them. He's starting to sober up from his high and vividly remembering why he thought being alone with Billy was a bad idea in the first place. Billy is decidedly *unpredictable*.

"Look man, would you watch the road?" Steve implores, a little desperately. "You're going to get us both killed."

Billy keeps staring at him, moving his cigarette to the other side of his mouth with the tip of his tongue and looking all the world like that thought doesn't bother him in the slightest. He tastes too much of the filter when he can't stop from biting down on it again. Steve feels like he's in the jaws of a crocodile who's about to do a death twist.

He can't read what Billy's thinking, and despite the small voice in his head telling him Billy wouldn't be reckless enough to crash them, Steve can't help but remember Billy's face when he'd grabbed him and beat him to the floor before everything had gone dark with the pain. His heart beats faster as he realizes he really doesn't know a damn thing about Billy at *all*. The rock music blaring from the radio seems louder in the stretch of silence between them, and it kicks the tension into high gear as Billy speeds way too fast down the street. It's dark enough on the flurry of asphalt that Billy wouldn't even have time to stop should something, or *someone*, cross his path. Steve really hopes they don't come up to any intersections any time soon.

"That's the truth, alright?" Steve raises his voice to be heard over the roar of the rock and the engine. Something in Billy snaps, and like the crack of a whip he's turning back to glare out the windshield and floor the gas even faster. He swerves the car onto a dirt turn-off and

within seconds he's skidding it to a sharp stop that has both of them lurching into the dashboard.

Steve keeps his hands braced against the glove compartment and breathes hard as his heart threatens to jump out of his throat. Billy calmly takes the key out of the ignition and flicks the remainder of his cigarette out of the window. Steve can taste the adrenaline, metallic like blood and salt on the back of his tongue as the rush of cold air filters through his lungs. He could swear his life just flashed before his eyes.

"Last chance." Billy leans in close enough to speak softly, all trace of humor gone and inches from Steve's face. He steps out of the car and slams the door closed behind him. Steve looks over his shoulder when he hears the trunk pop open and the fleeting thought of *'oh god he's really going to bury me out here'* crosses his mind once again. He can't see what Billy pulls out, the rear window covered by the dark top to the trunk.

It slams closed with a bang and then Billy's walking past the passenger's side of the car with six pack of cheap beer in his hand. Steve slumps back into his seat with a weary sigh, his fingers combing his bangs out of his face as the air puffs up his cheeks before he releases with a whoosh. After he's calmed down enough, he realizes just where they are as the gutted junkyard bus looms not more than a dozen feet away. He takes a deep breath and climbs out of the car, careful not to bang the door on any of the jutting trash heaps on either side.

If he could face down dozens of deadly monster dogs, he can take whatever Billy Hargrove can throw at him. He's not about to let the other boy bully him into submission. The junkyard looks different in the dark, and the last time he was here is sticky in his mind and he shakes his head to try and dislodge the memory. Billy stops before the door to the bus and throws Steve a high-eyebrow, expectant look before he climbs up into it.

Well, it'll certainly be more interesting than sitting in the empty school parking lot.

Billy pulls one of the warm bottles out of the cardboard caddy and tosses it to Steve, who almost fumbles it in his surprise. Steve's still looking at him warily. The beer is as good as a peace offering as he's going to get for the moment, as Billy doesn't care enough about his comfort for anything else. He's hoping it'll lower the other's guard enough that Billy can get some damn answers from him.

He surveys the decrepit inside of the bus with a frown. Despite how dirty and sharp its edges, it looks like a frequent hang out spot, and Billy wonders who the hell would want to hang out in such a dump. Still, it suites his purposes well enough. It's quiet enough in the small junkyard that they won't be *interrupted*.

Billy pulls his out a beer of his own and presses the top of it to the jutting windowsill before slamming a fist down to pop the cap off. It clinks to the ground in time with Steve's jerking jump at the noise and Billy hides his mean laugh behind a long drag of the bottle. It tastes like shit, especially warm, but it'll do. Steve is still frowning at the floor and shifting from one leg to the other.

"Look, I'm not really sure what you want me to say here." Steve shrugs in exasperation, beer bottle still clutched unopen in his fist. Billy's face smooths out to something blank but expectant as he slides himself down into one of the few seats that still fill the hull of the bus. He reaches an arm out for Steve's beer, and after a second of confusion and remembering it's in his hand, Steve hands it over with a sigh. Billy pops it open with nothing but a swift clench of his bare teeth and Steve stares at him with that familiar clenching at the bottom of his stomach. Billy holds it out to pass it back, the barest touch of smug coloring his expression around the cap in his mouth. Steve swallows and tries not to think about it too hard when he takes it back and stares at where Billy's lips had graced the glass.

"Max said she got lost in the woods." Billy leans back into the seat with an arm over the back and calmly brings his own bottle to his lips. He knows damn well that excuse is bullshit, but he's viciously curious to see what Steve has to say about it.

Steve stalls a moment too long over his mouthful of beer, eyes darting up in a telling way. "She did."

Billy tilts his head, a dark, knowing smile sneaking to his lips. His voice drops to a sultrier octave. “*Did she.*”

“They were out playing in the woods and got lost for like... a few hours.” He huffs, like he can’t even believe it himself. Billy’s jaw clenches, because he doesn’t believe it either.

“Was this before or after you were called in to babysit?” Billy asks patiently. Steve takes too long to think about it.

“Before?” Steve sweats. He can tell Billy’s not buying it, and him putting his foot in his own mouth is making things so much worse. At this rate, he’ll have to tell Billy the truth, and the fear of being arrested or even killed by the people who threatened them all into keeping it a secret rushes back to him in full force.

But... maybe it’s okay now? After all, Hawkins Lab had been shut down. The rebellious part of Steve rears its head with a hopeful look. Either way, if he doesn’t come up with something to get Billy off his back about the whole mess, he’s *screwed* anyway.

“I can’t tell you.” He says honestly. Part of him wants to, but he’d rather just drop the subject entirely. He’s pretty sure Billy isn’t going to go for that, but hey. It’s worth a try. Billy’s expression doesn’t change, and something about his calmness is more unsettling than if they boy was yelling in his face. The calm before the storm. “It’s a whole thing. With like, legally binding paperwork.”

“That doesn’t exactly ease my fucking mind.” Billy takes another swig, eyes never breaking their tether to Steve’s. His white-knuckle grip and dead tone are the only indicators of the rage brewing under the surface. He pulls off the bottle with a wet noise and regards Steve seriously, leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees. His voice drops to an even more dangerous low. “Now, are you going to tell me what’s really going on, or am I going to have to get it out of you the hard way, Harrington?”

Steve looks between the pretty blue eyes threatening to split his resolve—and his *body*—in two. For a moment, it looks as though Steve will deny him, but the brunette sighs and leans dejectedly against the wall opposite Billy. He rests a thumb over his lips as he

thinks of where to start, and just how much trouble he was going to get in for this.

“Okay.” He sighs again. “Okay.”

Billy leans back again to wait for him to start, satisfied he’d won, but a little disappointed that Steve gave in so easily. But Billy’s need for answers is greater than his desire to pull *King Steve* out of his shell for the night, so he ignores it, and waits.

Somewhere deep-down Steve knows Billy’s never going to believe a word of anything he says—so he tells him everything. From Hawkins Lab, to the gate and the Demogorgons. Well, *almost* everything—he leaves Eleven and the kids out of it. He figures they’ve already been through enough. Billy doesn’t react past lighting up another cigarette to keep his hands busy while Steve tries to explain what he knows about what happened. He tells him about the fucked-up nightmare he’s been through *twice* now until he’s down to the last dregs of his beer. Billy doesn’t toss him another.

“You finished?” When Billy finally speaks, he’s eerily calm. Steve’s elated rant about saving the world trails off as he remembers where he is and what he’s saying. For a moment, he almost felt like he *meant* something again. He studies the tightness to Billy’s limbs as the feeling fades, and he remembers he’s supposed to be happy that the nightmare is *over*.

“You wanted the truth. That was it.” Steve tosses the empty bottle to join the rest of the trash on the ground. His hair falls in his face as he meets Billy’s glare. If the other boy wants to fight him now, Steve will be all too happy to acquiesce.

Billy clenches his jaw and thumbs the remaining end of his smoke, ashes flicking across the back of his hand. He’s starting to think this whole thing is some kind of fucked-up revenge play, set up just for him. Maybe the thing in the Byer’s fridge was just somebody’s mutant, inbred puppy, and the drawings taped all over the walls the work of some schizoid kid. The whole thing feels like a big joke at his expense. He bets Max has something to do with it all—his little step-sister’s a regular little *mastermind*.

Billy pulls himself to his feet and doesn't miss the way Steve's entire body tenses like he's ready for a fight. Billy would give him one, if his anger hadn't turned to a heat-seeking missile with Max's name on it. He tosses his own bottle to the floor and adjusts his jacket. He gives Steve one last lingering look of heated disappointment before he's walking down the aisle and towards the exit of the bus.

Steve's brows furrow. He hadn't been expecting Billy to react like that, and he watches the other go before his brain kicks back in and he realizes Billy's the one who drove them here and now he's leaving *without* him. Steve starts to panic and he almost trips in his rush out the bus. He stops at the door and hangs out of it with both hands hanging onto the doorway. Billy's walking back to his car with barely-restrained rage in his stride.

"Wait—don't tell anybody I told you about this!" He yells out a little louder than he meant to. Billy looks back to him, unimpressed as he pops open the door to his Camaro.

"That'll be a tough one, Spielberg. You got a real *blockbuster* on your hands." Billy shouts in mock-sympathy and Steve's heart drops to the pit of his stomach as it churns with the warm beer and anxiety.

"I'm serious." Steve pleads, but Billy's expression just turns darker. He sighs heavier than he has all night. "You don't believe a word I just told you, do you?"

"Do *you*?" He speaks to Steve like he's a five-year-old or a crazy who needs help. Billy smiles, but there's no amusement behind it. "Have a nice life, Stevie."

Billy slides into his car and Steve's heart skips a beat as the engine revs up and then Billy's pulling out of the dirt in a cloud of swirling dust without even a glance back at Steve. The brunette stares in disbelief from the stair of the bus.

When the sight of the Camaro finally disappears into the dark of the night, Steve turns back into the bus to kick a seat hard and curse up a storm. He plants his fists on his hips and breathes hard through the pain shooting up his leg. He checks his watch. Only half an hour left until he has to drive Dustin home, and it's a long walk back to the

middle school.

Steve eyes the pack of beer Billy had left behind. He's already filled his night with bad decisions—what's one more?